

CHOOSING YOUR PAIN

Sermon, February 13, 2011

Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

Deuteronomy 30: 19

The starting quarterback was injured late in the college bowl game. Unfortunately, the number two quarterback had not even suited up for the game due to illness. There was no third string quarterback. This left only the team's punter, a freshman, who as a junior in high school had done a little bit of quarterbacking, but hadn't done so since; he had absolutely no game experience as a college quarterback. The coach had to throw him into the fray, however. They were ahead by two points, and there were just five minutes remaining in the game. It was first down, but the ball was resting on their own three yard line; they were pinned deep in their own territory. The coach's main concern was to get them away from the goal line so as to avoid the risk of a safety, which would throw the game into a tie (*if you don't follow football, a safety is when you are tackled in your own end zone; it's worth two points to the opposing team*). The coach just wanted to get a few more yards to give the punter some depth and breathing room, so he could punt the ball away and they would all trust the defense to hold on.

So the coach said, "Son, for the next three plays, hand off the ball to Jones, the fullback. For the next three plays let Jonesy run into the middle of the line and grind out some yardage. Then I want you to punt. Got that? Three times, give it to Jonesy, let him get a few yards, then on the fourth play, you punt." The young punter-now-quarterback repeated the instructions out loud, then went out on the field to do as he was told. On the first play he handed off to Jones, who was immediately stopped for no gain. On the second play, he handed it off and almost miraculously Jones found a hole off tackle and ran fifty yards! The crowd cheered. On the third play the young quarterback called the same play again and, miracle of miracles, the hole was there again, and Jones ran forty-five yards. The fans were going wild! The ball was on the opponent's two yard line, just six feet away from a touchdown, and just under three minutes left in the game. The team lined up quickly and the young quarterback received the snap, stepped back ... and punted the football into the stands. As the team came off the field, the coach angrily grabbed the young quarterback and asked, "What in the world were you thinking?" The quarterback answered blankly, "I was thinking what a dumb coach we have."

Few quarterbacks in professional football today call their own plays today; offensive coordinators and other coaches usually give the quarterback information via a built-in headphone in the helmet as to what to do for the next play. The quarterback, who usually has no choice in the matter, then relays the information to teammates and executes the plays. Dallas Cowboys head coach Tom Landry was one of the earliest advocates of taking the choice of play calling out of the quarterback's hands. Among current NFL quarterbacks, I'm told just two ... the Colt's Peyton Manning and the Falcon's Matt Ryan ... still call all the plays; everyone else has the plays called in for them. There is some advantage to that, especially with today's technology; the coaches in the skyboxes have a far better vantage point of the whole field, they can study individual players and their potential weaknesses in a way a man on the field just can't, so most quarterbacks are quite happy with the arrangement ... it certainly takes a huge burden of responsibility from them.

We can appreciate that. After all, don't some of you wish God would do that for you as you navigate the field of life, wondering what to do next? Call in the plays through a microphone next to your ear and tell you what to do? After all, He has a far better vantage point than you do! However, that's just not how it works. For better or worse, God allows us to make our own decisions. And actually, it's for better. He allows us to call our own plays. When He created us in His own image, this was primary among the characteristics with which He endowed us ... *the ability to choose*. The ability to choose is part of what it means to be human, it is part and parcel of what it means to be made in the image of God. Making choices is what it's all about! (*That's contrary to what some of us were told in Fellowship Hall at our Valentines' dance last night. We were told that the Hokey Pokey is what it's all about! And you know, there is some sense to that ... after all, isn't life best when you put your whole self in and shake it all about and don't hold back? But that's another sermon.*)

When God created us, He chose not to make us robotic mechanisms wholly obedient to His control. Nor did He choose to make us just one more animal controlled and utterly driven by passion and appetite and instinct. No, He endowed us with the awesome gift ... and the great burden ... of being free and responsible. In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed to sustain their life ... which included the opportunity to make a very real choice. That's what that forbidden tree symbolized. The tree was special because it stood as a symbol that they were responsible for, and given the human capacity of, making choices.

Real choices. That tree signified the privilege, the right, the necessity, the dignity that comes from making choices. Adam and Eve were given the choice to heed God's instructions and live forever in paradise, or they could choose to eat of the forbidden tree and die. And you know the story. They chose ...poorly (*to quote the Grail guardian knight from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*). And we have suffered pain, destruction and death ever since.

The book of Deuteronomy was Moses' farewell address to the people he loved and cared about, people he had been on the desert road with for forty years. They were about now to leave the wilderness and pass on into the promised land, but Moses wouldn't go with them. These are his final words to them ... words he no doubt chose quite carefully. "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Books of Moses, the five books known as the Pentateuch or the Torah (*in fact, in German Bibles Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are called First Moses, Second Moses, Third Moses and so on.*) I find it fascinating that the five Books of Moses begin with a choice, and they end with a choice ... as if God is saying through Moses, "Life or death. You pick." Make the right choices and you will live, you will prosper. Make the wrong choices, and destruction results.

One of the marks of maturity is realizing the choices we make have consequences. If we choose well, we reap rewards (usually). If we choose poorly, we often pay a steep price. We do reap what we sow. I like how one person put it: There are two major pains in life: *the pain of discipline* and *the pain of regret*. Often the pain of the latter comes from not suffering the pain of the former. It's interesting that the word "disciple" comes from the word "discipline." If we choose the pain of discipline as disciples of Jesus Christ, we reap huge benefits. If we don't, then we often reap the pain of hellish regret. Choose your pain.

The law of sowing and reaping has not been repealed. You sow a good life, a life of integrity, a life of kindness, a life of doing good things, of life of treating people with kindness and respect, of paying attention to your relationships with God and with your neighbor, a life of taking care of your body, mind and soul, and you will reap the good benefit of lasting friendships, better than average health, and a feeling of deep satisfaction within. However, take the shortcuts, be a cheater, be a slacker, be a scoundrel and eventually life will find you out ... as the saying goes, time *heals all wounds* ... and *wounds all heels*. The choice is ours. You don't have to live very long to discover this is the way life as God designed it works. Forget for a moment I am a pastor; any sound psychologist, any successful business leader, any competent doctor, any sage mentor would say the same: the sooner you learn to make good choices, the better your chances are for finding lasting happiness.

To be clear, Choice is not a moral good in and of itself. I think few words have been more politicized and propagandized than the word, "Choice." Choice *can* be wholesome and desirable; choice can also be mischievous and destructive ... it all depends on what is chosen. Interestingly, the Greek word for choice is "Haeresis;" we get our word *heresy* from it. The essence of heresy is wrong choice. We can (and often do) choose poorly. God's will for us is that we make choices which will lead to *life*. That's why He says to the people through Moses: "I have set before you life and death ... therefore choose life, that you and your children may live!" There are choices you and I make every day that determine the quality of our lives and the quality of the lives of the people we love and the quality of people we will be. There are destructive choices and there are constructive choices. There are choices that will make you and those who love you stronger and better, and there are choices that will wreak havoc in your life and theirs. God lovingly desires for each of us is to make choices that lead to full, satisfying and abundant life.

This brings me to the final thing to be said. There is one choice that supercedes all others, a choice most of you have already made, and that is to choose not only life, but to choose the One who calls Himself the Life ... and the Way, and the Truth. To choose Jesus is to choose life! Choose the sweet pain of disciplined discipleship of our Lord, not the pain of regret that comes from a life without the One who is the source of all life, goodness and joy ... in this life and forever. In all things, choose life ... choose Jesus Christ!

This got edited out on the spot during the delivery of the sermon, but I find the following excerpt from C.S. Lewis' Mere Christianity most relevant to the theme of this sermon; I tack it on as a sort of post script:

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, 'If you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.' I don't think that is the best way of looking at it. I'd much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.